

Preventing Wildfires in the Coastal Zone
Council President Scott Peters, First District
For the La Jolla Light, February 2007

Like many of you, I vividly remember waking up the morning of October 25, 2003 to the smell of acrid smoke. The sky was an eerie gray, and ash fell on cars and lawns like snow. When my phone calls to the overburdened Fire Department weren't returned, I drove myself the City's emergency operations center in Kearny Mesa where I learned about the two massive that wildfires were threatening lives and homes across the county.

The Cedar Fire ranks as one of the most devastating natural disasters in the City's history, destroying more than 300 homes and threatening thousands more. For ten tense days we were at the mercy of the Santa Ana winds, which fueled the massive fire along with acres and acres of dry brush. At one point, fire officials feared the fire would jump Interstate 805 and race along Rose Canyon, threatening University City and La Jolla. Luckily, fire crews fought back the flames, the winds changed, and we avoided a worst-case scenario.

I toured the devastated areas of Tierrasanta and Scripps Ranch immediately after the fires, along with my colleagues Councilmembers Madaffer and Maienschein. We vowed to do all within our power to prevent another catastrophic wildfire in the future.

Thanks to the leadership and quick work of then-Fire Chief Jeff Bowman, the City Council approved a series of measures to require fire-resistant building materials, emergency evacuation plans and stricter brush management policies.

In La Jolla, the Mount Soledad Evacuation and Structure Protection Plans were created to prevent or minimize the loss of life and property. I have worked with the Alpha Project to clear brush along hillsides. And we beefed up our Community Emergency Response Team ("CERT") to train community members to assist their neighbors in the early hours of a disaster. Since November of 2005 we've seen a six-fold increase in the number of CERT volunteers in District One.

But there is still more to be done. While the City quickly enacted new brush management regulations in the most heavily-damaged areas such as Tierrasanta and Scripps Ranch, California Coastal Commission approval is required in areas covered by the Coastal Zone. This had the greatest impact in District One, where the Coastal Zone extends from La Jolla eastward along the watershed to Rancho Peñasquitos.

On February 15, the Coastal Commission considers the City's request to adopt a buffer zone around homes neighboring open-space areas based on certain factors such as topography and amount and type of vegetation. We're also asking that the Commission waive the requirement for a coastal development permit for brush management on private property. Overly burdensome requirements for homeowners could put our entire community at risk by discouraging regular brush maintenance. Finally, the Commission will consider the City's request to use herds of goats for clearing brush on steep hills and other difficult-to-access areas.

The Commission convenes in San Diego this month, which is good news for residents who want to testify on this important community issue. The hearing will be held at the Catamaran Resort Hotel, 3999 Mission Boulevard. Call my office for more information, (619) 236-6611.

To serve your community as a first responder, sign up for the Community Emergency Response Team. There's a link on my website, www.sandiego.gov/cd1.